

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

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By Damon Veach

LAND GRANTS: There are many ways to solve ancestral problems. In recent columns, several of these venues have been discussed. This just goes to show that there is more to genealogical research than one might think. If at first you don't find clues in one area of research, you have to move on and seek the answers from another angle.

Land grants comprise another method of seeking out information on family lineages. In fact, this was one of the major elements that led many families to give up their homes in the eastern part of the country and seek a new life to the west. This is definitely true with the Foshee family in DeSoto Parish. Morris Smith Foshee, my great grandfather, served in the Civil War, and after the war, he obtained a land grant that brought him to Louisiana with his family. Most of my direct lineage settled in DeSoto Parish but others went into areas below DeSoto Parish.

On this tract of land bordering on the state line of Texas, the Foshee family forged their new life. The old dogtrot home still stands today and stepping inside is like stepping back in time. The pictures, furniture, and all the personal items are still there. My cousin maintains the home, and even the old black kettle is still in the front yard. The fence is no longer there, but other than the hallway being closed off to save on heating expenses, the home is the same.

In my research, I made it a point to obtain the Civil War paperwork for this ancestor, and it revealed a lot about this man and the way he served the South. Being from Alabama with family members also living in Georgia, most of the Foshee brothers and cousins of age joined the Confederate cause.

Even if the land grant had not been acquired, there was still this quest, not only for Foshee ancestors but other families as well, to move west to better themselves. They braved the hardships in order to obtain this dream. Stories of hardships abound, and one set of circumstances always led to another. It's this way with research. Once you open one door, there are others waiting to be opened.

Land claims date much further back than the Civil War period. These claims were filed by settlers in Florida after the territory was transferred from Spain to the United States. Actually beginning in 1790, Spain offered these to encourage settlement in the area that is now Florida. The United States agreed to honor these but the people still had to validate their claims. They were either confirmed or denied. Unfortunately, most of the records for West Florida are missing.

These grants or claims provide information on early American history from the Second Spanish Period (1783-1821) and the Territorial Period (1821-1845). Grantees were required to provide descriptions of the land, date of the grant, size of the grant along with property boundaries, and proof of residency and cultivation. Because of overlapping information, not all of the recorded data can be considered accurate. This is why a search of other records is needed in order to make certain that information that has been recorded is accurate.

If you are researching land grants in the Texas and Louisiana areas, you can learn a lot by going to the *Handbook of Texas*. It states initially that the history of land grants is a long and complex process. The earliest grant was made by the Spanish crown to establish a mission and presidio in East Texas in 1716. The Marques de San Miguel de Aguayo made a report to the king of Spain proposing that 400 families be transported from the Canary Islands, Galicia, or Havana to populate the province of Texas. This plan was approved. This is one of the first references you can find for Canary Islanders, who were granted town lots in San Antonio de Bexar in 1731.

Recently, much has been written about the archaeological digs taking place in Ascension Parish where Canary Islanders settled. It was in 1777 that the Spanish authorities ordered a recruitment of seven hundred men from the Canary Islands to serve as militiamen and settlers in Louisiana. About two thousand Canary Islanders came to Louisiana from 1778 to 1783. These military duties were to occupy and defend Spanish territory in the lower section of the state especially near waterways having outlets to the Gulf of Mexico.

These individuals were placed in settlements at Galveztown, Valenzuela, St. Bernard, and Barataria. These people suffered hardships but managed to survive and eventually claimed this part of Louisiana as their new homeland. Descendants are scattered throughout the state and beyond, and many Hispanic surnames remain in the area.

The Spanish Town section of Baton Rouge was also settled by Canary Islanders, and John Sykes, who is now with the Louisiana State Museum, is a resident on Eighth Street and a historian with a book in the works on the history of all the homes in this part of town. A recent meeting of the Canary Islander group found members taking a walking tour with Sykes conducting the explanation of these historic homes. My home is located on this original land grant section, and I've tried to collect as much information on this as possible. Sykes provided me with a brief history which backed up what I had already learned, and his work carried me even further back than I had been able to uncover.

My home, the Guell House as it is now known, was built in 1909, and that means it is 100 years old. Built by Colonel and Mrs. Prescott on a part of the original Spanish land grant behind the present-day Stewart-Dougherty Plantation Home, my bungalow cottage first became the home of Frank Webb. The homes on either side

of my house were built at the same time and served as rentals for LSU professors. Webb was born in Ireland, and he came to the United States in 1866 when he was 10-years old. A "sugar machinist," he moved to Baton Rouge in 1894 as manager of the Baton Rouge Sugar Company. Originally located just north of Spanish Town across then University (now Capitol Lake) on property owned today by the State of Louisiana, the company operated a large sugar refinery which contributed greatly to the industrial growth of Baton Rouge in the 1890s.

Antonio Ramon Guell (1878-1933), a professor of mechanical engineering at Louisiana State University rented the house in 1913. Born in Costa Rica of Spanish ancestry, Guell graduated from LSU in 1907 with a "brilliant record." He returned to his alma mater as an instructor of mechanical engineering in 1910 and later became head of the department. In August of 1911, Guell returned to San Jose, Costa Rica where he married Nicolasa Tristan (1884-1963), and she and Guell then returned to Baton Rouge. The Guells were the parents of three children: a stillborn daughter in 1912, and two sons, Antonio Gilberto (1913-1998) and Charles Henry (1914-1997). The Guells later lived in two other houses in Spanish Town: 668 N. 7th Street (1917-1920) and the now destroyed 104 Lake Park (1922). Professor Guell resigned from LSU in 1920 after accepting a position in charge of a large sugar refinery construction project in Cuba. He returned briefly to LSU in 1922, but he subsequently moved to New Orleans.

In December of 1918, the Prescotts sold the house to Henry Maurine Nelson (who died in 1963) and his wife, Mary B. Leonard. Nelson, a native of Elkhart, Indiana, moved to Baton Rouge in 1915 to work for Standard Oil. Following Mrs. Nelson's death here in April of 1936, Nelson married Oma Welch of Rankin County, Mississippi. There were no children by either marriage and the property was sold, year undetermined, by Nelson's widow. In talking to various people, I learned of a lady who lived here, possibly Mrs. Nelson, and I was also told that the man who played the organ at the old Paramount Theater also having lived here. I purchased the home in 1994, and it has been completely restored inside and outside making certain that all the original designs were not altered. The siding on the outside had been added during the 1940s, and this was not removed but has been noted in the historical documentation.

The Canary Islanders Heritage Society of Louisiana was formed in 1996 and is devoted to promoting and preserving the heritage of these Canarian ancestors. The original group was made up mainly of those individuals who lived in Galveztown, located at the confluence of the Amite River and Bayou Manchac, and in Valenzuela, located nearby on the west side of the Mississippi River along Bayou Lafourche. Of course, they maintain interests in all of the Canarian settlements in Louisiana.

If you read previous columns in this series, you can learn more about the Canary Islanders. If you should determine that your property is a part of a land grant, you

will be able to uncover a wealth of information that will lead you to more fascinating facts about the history of the area and perhaps your own lineage.

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BIRTH INDEX: When completed, the *Arkansas Prior Birth Index* will list all Arkansas birth certificates beginning in 1942 to people born before February 1, 1914. Volumes 1 and 2 index certificates were filed in 1942 by people born before 1903. They include 54,000 names, with birth dates, counties of birth, mother's names and information necessary to order a copy of the original certificate.

This is a very important resource for nineteenth and twentieth century Arkansas research. These first two volumes are on sale now at half price and provide a nice source for obtaining information about early families in Arkansas. The regular cost was \$60 each, and now they are being offered for \$30 each. The birth certificates are still being indexed by volunteers from the Arkansas Genealogical Society.

Orders for these volumes should be directed to the Arkansas Genealogical Society, P.O. Box 26374, Little Rock, AR 72221-6374. Add \$12.50 to each order to cover shipping and handling. Arkansas customers also need to add local taxes as applicable. There are only a few copies remaining at this price so you need to act quickly.

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MISCELLANEA: Queries are printed in this format free of charge. Books and society publications are also reviewed if a sample copy is sent with each request. Be sure to check out the new formats of this column when they are posted every Monday morning. And tell your genealogical friends about this free service. All back issues are archived for your convenience, and they are presented in three formats – PDF, HTML, and Word. Send news releases and other items directly to Damon Veach, Cajuns, Creoles, Pirates and Planters, 709 Bungalow Lane, Baton Rouge, LA 70802-5337. The e-mail address is ancestorslaveach@cox.net.